

# Beyond the Mainstream: Max Schmidt's Research on "The Arawak" in the Context of Contemporary German Ethnology

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### ABSTRACT

Analyzing the work of Max Schmidt (1874-1950), especially his 1917 book *Die Aruaken. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Kulturverbreitung* [The Arawak: A Contribution to the Problem of Cultural Dissemination], this article deals with methodological and theoretical trends among German ethnologists carrying out expeditions in the Amazon region at the turn of the nineteenth century. The approaches outlined are placed in the context of the institutionalisation of ethnology as a separate academic discipline in Germany. The focus is on the development of modern fieldwork methods; the critique of diffusionism by Schmidt and other South America researchers; and the specific approaches of Max Schmidt who, in spite of the contemporary emphasis on "material" and "intellectual" culture, also considered sociological issues in his analysis.

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### KEYWORDS

Max Schmidt,  
German ethnology,  
Arawak, Amazonia,  
(financing of)  
expeditions,  
fieldwork, (critique  
of) diffusionism

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

"Max Schmidt laid stone upon stone in the great structure of Brazilian ethnology. He was an honest and industrious worker. Not everyone can be an architect. Max Schmidt could not be compared with the brilliant and powerful personality reflected in the works of Karl von den Steinen, nor did he have the fanatic will with which Curt Nimuendajú integrated himself into the life of the Indians to the extent that he could understand the most difficult problems of their culture better than anyone ever before. But as long as studies about the native peoples of Brazil continue, Max Schmidt will be thought of as the researcher of important ergological, economical, and juridical questions, and as an indispensable source of knowledge about many tribes in Matto Grosso" (Baldus, 1951a: 303).

With these words Herbert Baldus (1899-1970) ended his obituary of the ethnologist Max Schmidt (1874-1950), who had died under tragic circumstances in Paraguay one year earlier. Baldus did not write a hymn of praise, but rather attempted to pay an objective and critical tribute to the scholar who grew up in relatively well-to-do surroundings, had first studied law and then, following his own inclinations, devoted his life's work—as well as his private means—to the study of indigenous cultures in the South American lowlands.

As Baldus correctly mentioned, Schmidt's work already during his lifetime stood in the shadow of other studies and personalities that would mark the young discipline of "ethnology" far longer than Schmidt's endeavors. Yet, the analysis of Max Schmidt and his work is of interest today not merely for the sake of historical inclusiveness. Schmidt not only contributed to a better knowledge of the ethnography of the Amazon area, but also to the

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and updated version of an unpublished paper, encouraged by Augusto Oyuela-Caycedo and Manuela Fischer several years ago and translated from the German by Emily Schalk. I am grateful to Han Vermeulen for valuable comments. A Portuguese version will be published in Petscheli and Schröder (eds.).

**Figure 1**  
Cover of Max Schmidt's book *Die Aruaken* (1917)



establishment of field research. In his work, he repeatedly contested research traditions and contemporary debates in his own discipline. Aside from his critical standpoints, he endeavored to integrate perspectives and approaches, which until then were dealt with only marginally within the dominant discussion, into scholarly debate, and thus stimulated new theoretical views. In addition, he was intensively concerned with the collections stored in the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* (Royal Museum of Ethnology) in Berlin and through generally comprehensible summaries tried to contribute to a record of contemporary ethnological knowledge; providing an orientating guide for delineating the boundaries of the discipline at that time. Moreover, in his writings he repeatedly called for an end to "European" arrogance and condescension when dealing with foreign cultures. However, Schmidt saw no contradiction in combining a critique of "civilized people" and calling for an "unbiased judgment" of non-European people, on the one hand, and noting the potential use of such knowledge in colonial work, on the other hand (Schmidt, 1920-21, vol. 1: 2, 8).<sup>2</sup>

Max Schmidt did not start his professional life as an ethnographer. At first, he studied medicine, but after one semester changed his subject and continued with legal studies. In 1899 he obtained his doctorate at the University of Erlangen with a thesis about *Beiträge zur ratio juris im römischen Recht* (Contributions to the ratio juris in Roman law). For a short time, he worked at the local court of Blankenese, but soon moved to Berlin where he enrolled at the university in both ethnology and anthropology, also starting work as a volunteer at the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin. From 1900 to 1901, he undertook his first expedition to Central Brazil. Upon his return, he landed a job as an assistant of the director at the museum in Berlin. In the museum he repeatedly ascended the ranks, becoming head of the department of South America in 1918.

In 1910, 1914, and from 1926 to 1928, Schmidt again went to South America to study the culture of indigenous societies. In 1917 he was awarded his second doctorate, this time about *Die Aruaken. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Kulturverbreitung* (The Arawak: A Contribution to the Problem of Cultural Dissemination) at the University of Leipzig (see Fig. 1). In 1918 he obtained the title of "professor", and from 1921 onwards he also worked as associate professor ("außerordentlicher Professor") at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität of Berlin (today: Humboldt-Universität). In 1929, after his fourth research trip to South America, Schmidt resigned from his work in Berlin. He first went to Brazil and then to Paraguay, where he continued his fieldwork and contributed to the development of Paraguayan ethnology. Seriously ill and without financial means, he died in Asunción in 1950.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, I shall discuss the achievements of Max Schmidt within the framework of contemporary developments in German ethnology, and of research of the South American lowlands in particular. A few initial remarks on the

**2** The argumentation in an earlier contribution is ambiguous. On the one hand, Schmidt refers to the lack of legal protection for Brazilian Indians and, with view of the German colonial policies in Africa, emphasizes that indigenous law should be studied as well, in order that it could be considered in given cases in colonies. On the other hand, he emphasizes the advantage of this knowledge for an "effective control of the economic configurations" (Schmidt 1907: 462, 475).

**3** For more detailed biographical information, see Baldus (1951a-b), Bossert and Villar (2013), Schmidt (1955) and Susnik (1991).



**Figure 2**

Caetano, chief of the Guató, serves as a guide for Max Schmidt, 1910. (Courtesy: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany, No. VIII E 2680)

history of expeditions may illustrate the slow but steady formation of modern research practices in fieldwork. These are followed by two sections that elucidate Schmidt's thematical-theoretical approach in agreement with or differing from topics of discussion in contemporary ethnology. A conclusion summarizes my view on Max Schmidt as an often ignored, but remarkable innovative thinker and an industrious fieldworker of his era.

#### RESEARCH EXPEDITIONS AND FIELDWORK

During the thirty years before the outbreak of World War I, sometimes retrospectively designated as the "age of the great expeditions" (Illius, 1992: 108), a comparatively large number of German scientists traveled to the South American lowlands to study the cultures of indigenous ethnic groups living there.

When viewing these travels, particular aspects are striking: Even in its seminal years, ethnology in Germany was not purely "arm-chair" anthropology. As early as the nineteenth century, numerous persons, who not only considered themselves as "data collectors", but also as scientists, traversed foreign regions to undertake research. This research was given an enduring structure by the influence of museums, which were the central institutions for the discipline during the nineteenth and the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> As a rule, the financial support provided by museums was connected with the obligation to acquire compre-

**4** In a seminal study, Han F. Vermeulen (2015) analysed the genesis of ethnography and ethnology as terms, methods, and research programs in the work of German-speaking Enlightenment historians. As an independent academic discipline, with its own institutions (the first ethnographic museums), permanent jobs for persons calling themselves "Völkerkundler/Ethnologists" and the possibility to habilitate at an university – the first time achieved by Adolf Bastian in 1866 (for "Ethnographie"), and second by Karl von den Steinen in 1889 (for "Ethnologie") – Ethnology was established in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century.



hensive collections, a precondition that could force an early departure from one area in order to acquire new ethnographic objects in another. Nonetheless, during this period, a tendency from extensive travels in an extended region to more intensive stays with one specific ethnic group can be discerned.<sup>5</sup>

The history of German travelers in the Amazonas region, who understood themselves explicitly as ethnologists, seeing science as their profession and who in their own country at some time worked in a museum or at an university where they evaluated and published the compiled data and collections, begins with Karl von den Steinen (1855-1929).<sup>6</sup> In 1884 von den Steinen and his companions traversed the area of the Alto Xingu (see Chapter 1). They were provided with a military escort on the part of the Brazilian authorities, whose number von den Steinen attempted to keep to a minimum. This undertaking did not result in anything of relevance for the economic development of the country (Steinen, 1885: 228). Instead, von den Steinen emphasized that the province of Mato Grosso would hold greater treasures than gold and diamonds (Steinen, 1886: 327). The fact that he returned to the Rio Xingu basin again, in order to devote himself once more in greater detail to the study of the indigenous people in that region began during the first expedition, clearly shows the real interest of this scholar: the study of the culture of people, who until then had been largely ignored in academic research, viewed as a contribution to an universal science of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

During his second expedition, von den Steinen left his companions for a short time; he became aware that their appearance as a group had a negative influence on the contact situation. In his book *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* (Among the Native Peoples of Central Brazil), published in 1894, he emphasized that the relationship with the Indians improved significantly when he resided as a guest, alone in their village. Referring to the wholehearted behavior of his hosts in those days, he wrote: "none too little of this [behavior] disappeared when the larger party came; the complete impartiality that I as an individual person was shown, did not remain, and the behavior came to resemble more of the known pattern that tends to be described in books" (Steinen, 1894: 56; 100).<sup>8</sup>

In von den Steinen's footsteps, Herrmann Meyer (1871-1932) undertook two expeditions to the Xingu region of central Brazil in 1896 and 1899. The second expedition in particular, which in view of those times was equipped in downright luxury, disintegrated quickly due to internal controversies, barely navigable rivers, as well as hunger and illness among the participants.<sup>9</sup>

The after-effects of this expedition were reported even by Max Schmidt, who arrived in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso, not quite two years after Meyer's second expedition. The grand outfitting of Meyer's expedition had heightened expectations, which Schmidt, much more modestly equipped,

**5** See in detail Kraus (2004a; 2014). On the emergence of ethnological museums in Germany as well as on the general situation of ethnology during the German Kaiserreich, see also Penny (2002), Bunzl and Penny (2003).

**6** Karl von den Steinen himself called Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794-1868) the founder of Brazilian ethnography (Steinen, 1894: 397). That being said, this famous researcher, whose collections still count among the most outstanding holdings of the ethnological museum in Munich today (Museum Fünf Kontinente), cannot be designated a professional representative of an independent academic discipline. Contrarily, Karl von den Steinen, educated as a physician and psychiatrist, achieved the *habilitation* in "Ethnologie" (ethnology) after the two Xingu expeditions in 1889 in Berlin. In 1891 he was given the title of professor in Marburg. He later worked in the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin until 1906. Paul Ehrenreich (1855-1914) traveled throughout Brazil at about the same time as von den Steinen, and in 1887 together with von den Steinen. Ehrenreich was also in close contact with the Berlin Museum. In 1911 he received a professorship; on von den Steinen, see Coelho [ed.] (1993); Hermannstädter (2002); Kraus (2004a); on Ehrenreich cf. Kraus (2004a) and Hempel (2015).

**7** Cf. Fischer, Bolz and Kamel (2007); with reference to research in the Amazon region, see Kraus (2007).

**8** The accompaniment of a large team was not of foremost interest to von den Steinen, who noted that the military escort in Brazil was more of a necessary evil than his own wish. Other ethnologists, such as Fritz Krause

could not meet (Schmidt, 1905: 24, 40-41.). Furthermore, Schmidt noted changes in the structure of indigenous society. Accordingly, Antonio Bakairi, who had accompanied von den Steinen as well as Meyer on their expeditions, had become a wealthy and well-armed leader in the region of the Indians as a result of the pay that he had got for his support of their expeditions (Kraus, 2004a: 362-371; 2014: 42-46).

Schmidt's plan in 1901 was first long-term research in a village on the Rio Xingu. Contrary to the preceding expeditions, he wished to rely solely on a Brazilian assistant as well as the alternating support of Indians. However, he was unable to fulfill this plan, which now seems quite modern. After a few weeks Schmidt became seriously ill and had to return to Cuiabá under dramatic conditions. He had not even reached the village of the Kamayurá in the Alto Xingu area, where he intended to carry out what would have been the first stationary fieldwork in the area. En route to this village, Bakairi, Nahukwá, and Aweti Indians took possession of all goods Schmidt had brought along for exchange, so that he found himself forced to retreat.

It is noteworthy that Schmidt published his experiences on the Xingu river in all openness, without seeking the fault for the failure of his plan in others – contrary to, for example, Herrmann Meyer.<sup>10</sup> Despite his sometimes painful experiences Schmidt did not change, neither in his positive attitude towards the Indians nor in his general endeavor and personal intention to carry out fieldwork. Thus, subsequent to his more or less unsuccessful first Xingu venture, Schmidt, after a short recuperation in Cuiabá, visited the Guató in the border area of Brazil and Bolivia, still in 1901 (Schmidt, 1905). As mentioned above, prior to his final emigration to South America, he had departed from Germany for a total of four field trips; in later journeys he again visited the Guató and also returned to the Bakairi (see Fig. 2, 3).<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Schmidt's travels – and in a sense, especially the failure of his first expedition – are an impressive example of a new research strategy with the explicit aim to avoid a position of superiority. As the aim was to become acquainted with the indigenous population, and not to dominate them, traveling researchers increasingly relied upon their native hosts. Thus, the at times, rather indiscriminate assumption that conditions of power in the field were generally to the advantage of the white researchers, or were almost completely manipulated to suit their own interests, is quite erroneous.<sup>12</sup>

With more success than Max Schmidt, Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924) carried out research in the South American lowlands during the following years (see Chapter 5). Similarly, Koch-Grünberg was accompanied by only one white assistant and otherwise relied on the help of indigenous individuals.<sup>13</sup> He traversed relatively large areas – out of interest in ethnographic-geograph-

from Leipzig, rejected such an escort, referring explicitly to von den Steinen's reports on the negative experience with such entourages (Krause, 1911a: 28).

**9** Koch-Grünberg (2004). Meyer's expeditions represent a special case in German explorations of the Xingu. Financially independent, Herrmann Meyer endeavored, amongst others, to shed the shadow cast by his older brother Hans Meyer, a renowned colonial geographer and specialist on East Africa. Thus, his journey was directed more towards attaining prestige than towards achieving scientific results. With its pompous furnishings and the authoritarian behavior of its leader, his journey almost seemed like transferring an expedition in colonial Africa to the context of Brazil (Kraus, 2004b: 474 ff.). Meyer was the only one of the explorers mentioned above who became economically engaged after the expeditions. He invested in the establishment of colonies for German emigrants in southern Brazil. Following the second expedition his involvement in ethnology was more like that of a patron. See in more detail, Hermannstädter (2004).

**10** Meyer never published the planned comprehensive monograph. Only a few articles appeared subsequent to his second expedition, in which he mainly attributed the failure of his fieldwork to the difficult geographical conditions and to mistakes made by his accompanying team (see Hermannstädter 2004, Kraus 2004b).

**11** See also Schmidt's critique on the lack of "enthusiasm for fieldwork" in Felix Speiser's descriptions of his travels (M. Schmidt, 1926). For a more detailed analysis of this

ical pioneer studies but also compelled by the need to acquire comprehensive museum collections; thereby, the actual duration of his stay in different villages varied greatly. Nevertheless, he spent several weeks or even months with certain ethnic groups. The itinerary of Konrad Theodor Preuss (1869-1938), for instance, was marked by even longer stationary sojourns.<sup>14</sup>

The description of these travel experiences, which were still standard in the work of the ethnographers mentioned above, did not necessarily serve as an opportunity for self-esteem or for heralding one's own deeds, as many (post-)modern analyses of travel reports often imply.<sup>15</sup> To the contrary, their travel journals in South America imparted the aspect of early discussions on the methods employed. Through their accounts of their individual course of travel, the forms of contact that took place, and of concrete individual problems and impressions, these scientists formulated deliberations about the conditions of travel and research in the field of a foreign culture. On the one hand, these observations made a precise contextualization and assessment of the data collected possible; on the other, they were of use for later travelers in their preparations and possible approaches for abating actual difficulties in field research (Kraus, 2004a: 204-222).

This aspiration was explicitly formulated in the work of the Leipzig ethnologist Fritz Krause (1881-1963), who had traveled through parts of the area of the Rio Araguaia in 1908, where he had come into contact foremost with Karajá Indians. In the beginning of his book, *In den Wildnissen Brasiliens* (In Brazil's Wilderness), published in 1911, Krause justified the structure of his description that follows the common contemporary division into "travel experiences" and "travel results." He stated:

*I commence with a report on the expedition itself in the first part, which precedes the actual results. I consider this highly important, for the results of the expedition can only be appraised correctly when the manner of their attainment is known, that is, the conditions under which the studies took place (Krause, 1911a: iii).*

Accordingly, Krause's aim was not to show the life of the Indians, but rather life

*with the Indians, as from only this manner of presentation can possibilities for research, especially the manifold constraints one is subjected to out there, much against one's will, be recognized. [...] Thus, this report includes, in short, an overview of the geographical conditions in the areas traversed, the manner of travel, the cultural situation of the country, and, hence, will offer much that is new and can provide important pointers for future travelers (Krause, 1911a: iv; italics by the present author).*

expedition, see Kraus (2004a: 317-326). Short summaries are presented in Hemming (1995 [1987]) and Kraus (2000). More recently, Bossert and Villar (2013; 2015) have provided a deep and sympathetic analysis of Schmidt's travels.

**12** See for example Niekisch (2002: 8). During his visit to the Aparai of northeastern Brazil in 1924, the Swiss ethnographer Felix Speiser made the following interesting observation: "Now of course we could have behaved differently among the Indians, that is, as white masters who made demands of the Indians; and after our return we were ridiculed for not doing just that. But this reproach could only have been voiced by those who did not know our goals. We wanted to conduct ethnographic studies and were therefore dependent on the Indians viewing us as friends whom they trusted, to whom they would gladly communicate what we wanted to know" (Speiser, 1926: 125).

**13** Nevertheless, it should be noted that Koch-Grünberg simultaneously suffered and benefited from the system of structural violence that had been imposed on the area by rubber collectors (Kraus, 2018).

**14** On Preuss, see Fischer (2007); Kraus (2004a; 2007); Valdovinos (2013); Reyes (2017). See also the online exhibition of the Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek: <http://ausstellungen.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/preuss/exhibits/show/kolumbien-preuss/konrad-theodor-preuss> (last accessed 19 May 2018).

**15** The travel description by Herrmann Meyer was an exception, as already noted (see Kraus, 2004b: 476-483).

By contrast, the second part of Krause's book, the actual ethnography, was intended

*more as a reference book. A strict distinction is made between those events that had been observed just once or several times and those about which information had been solely reported. This distinction cannot, in my view, be strict enough, if errors are to be avoided that afterwards are passed on and on. Some reports that seemed uncertain to me are dealt with in the footnotes, as a sign to later researchers that they should be investigated (Krause, 1911a: iv).<sup>16</sup>*

Subsequent to this research trip, Krause made several plans aimed at exploring the area between the Rio Araguaia and the Rio Xingu. In the preserved records he reached out to his colleague Theodor Koch-Grünberg for discussion on the subject. Krause called for the assignment of up to four scientists, who were to study the respective language as well as the course of festivities during the yearly cycle and who would remain up to one year with a specific ethnic group; which, during that time meet up occasionally to exchange experiences.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the execution of this project was above all thwarted by the outbreak of World War I, which largely disrupted the German tradition of research in Amazonia.

What left a lasting mark on these early expeditions – aside from other factors, such as the behavior of the indigenous people who were visited, the regional political and geographical constellations encountered, or the personality of the respective ethnographers – was the collaboration with museums. These institutions both supported research and constrained it at the same time. Thus, the sale of collections acquired was one of the most important financial resources for ethnologists and their expeditions. In many cases researchers had to carry the financial risk alone. For example, when Karl von den Steinen arrived in South America for the first time in 1883, neither the exact route of travel nor the financing of the expedition had been clarified. It was only on site that von den Steinen decided to traverse the Xingu region, hitherto unknown to scientists. The 1,500 German marks from the Berlin Museum, mediated by the German consul in Belém, and the additional sum of 4,500 marks for the sale of his collection to the Berlin Museum were paid only *after* termination of his travels. Prior to his expedition von den Steinen had been assured funds of only 1,000 marks by Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), the then director of the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin.

Other scientists also worked without financial security initially. Theodor Koch-Grünberg accompanied Herrmann Meyer in 1899, who alone assumed the costs for transportation, equipment, food, and accommodation, a situation that corresponded with the widespread model for young researchers traveling without any remuneration (Koch-Grünberg, 2004: 21). Aside from funds from the Berlin Museum, Koch-Grünberg was able to carry out his famed Rio Negro

**16** That the introductory passages were actually used in the way mentioned is attested in various documents in the archives. For instance, Koch-Grünberg explicitly recommended the first chapter in Krause's work ("Zweck und Ziel der Expedition, Plan und Ausrüstung" (Purpose and goal of the expedition, plan and equipment)) when preparing for travel to South America. Letter by Koch-Grünberg to Hintermann, 30 Oct. 1923, VK Mr. A.35. In his review of Erland Nordenskiöld's book *Forschungen und Abenteuer in Südamerika* (Research and Adventures in South America), Wilhelm Koppers (1923/24: 1102) noted: "This publication is also intended for larger circles. But this does not render it indispensable for the specialist. For here he not only sees each stage of travel, but also the individual conditions under which the various results were gained."

**17** These plans, made in 1910, 1914 and 1916, are now preserved in VK Mr. G.I.1, see also Kraus (2004a: 106-07; 264-65).



journey above all through the financial support from his future mother-in-law. He later reimbursed this sum through the sale of collections.<sup>18</sup>

Max Schmidt, who like Karl von den Steinen came from a relatively wealthy family, financed his first journey to Brazil in 1900-01 with private funds. Only after his return from the Xingu Indians in Cuiabá did he receive financial support from the *Ethnologisches Hilfskomitee* (Ethnological Auxiliary Committee),<sup>19</sup> which enabled him to continue his travels to the Guató. Likewise, during his later expeditions Schmidt often paid the travel costs and only later, whether through state support or the sale of the acquired collection to the Berlin Museum, was he partially reimbursed. The possible risks involved in attempts to acquire large numbers of ethnographic objects are already apparent in Schmidt's first trip: Due to illness, in 1901 he had to leave his collections behind in the Xingu region. However, ultimately one year later some Bakairi brought the objects to Cuiabá, from where they embarked upon a short odyssey on various steamships before arriving in Corumba. There the ownerless crates were discovered by chance by the German consul Hesslein, who ordered their shipment to Berlin, where they were delivered to Schmidt, who to his great surprise received them three years after his return from Brazil (Schmidt, 1905: xiv).

Thus, collecting in the field was of an ambivalent character, too. On the one hand, it reflected the scholarly interest in material culture;<sup>20</sup> on the other, it proved to be an economic necessity that determined other aspects of fieldwork. The demand to take large numbers of exchange goods to the Indians and bring back comprehensive collections, made journeying a logistically tedious undertaking and restricted other research interests.<sup>21</sup> This becomes clear, for example, in a letter by Koch-Grünberg, dated 1916, in which the researcher regrets having to relinquish the pursuit of his scientific interests because of the need to acquire large collections of ethnographic objects. He wrote: "When the present irrational time [World War I] is over, and the Ocean is open again, I shall probably journey once more to the upper Rio Negro, to accomplish what I could not carry out as I had wished for at that time because I had to collect for museums. There I shall record the rich mythology of the Arawak tribes and their folk magic" (Letter of Koch-Grünberg to A.V. Frič, 13 April 1916, StA Lu (EL 232, Büschel 333), see also Kraus (2004a: 109-114)).

In the following years, the wish to travel once more to the upper Rio Negro with enough time to study mythology, which his collecting obligations during the expedition between 1903 and 1905 had prevented, often appears in Koch-Grünberg's letters. Thereby, he also expressed his impression – and with regard to the work of Max Schmidt, this should be emphasized – that the Arawak influence in South America was "certainly far greater than imagined until now, in mythology as well" (Letter of Koch-Grünberg to Walter Lehmann, 7 December 1920, VK Mr. A.29). However, Koch-Grünberg was unable to fulfill

**18** On the Rio Negro journey, see Ortiz (1995); Kraus (2004c; 2018). On financial resources for research in general, see Kraus (2004a: 108-129).

**19** In existence from 1881 to 1925, the *Ethnologische Hilfskomitee* (until 1902: *Hilfscomité für Vermehrung der Ethnologischen Sammlungen der Königlichen Museen*) was established under the decisive participation of Adolf Bastian. Its members provided capital (at least 3,000 marks per person) for the purchase of collections or the financing of journeys. Upon receiving the collection, the Museum paid this sum back to the committee (Westphal-Hellbusch, 1973: 65-68).

**20** In Bastian's view, collections had the same function for ethnologists as manuscripts for philologists. Within the canonical scientific disciplines they also served to delineate ethnology from other fields that were likewise concerned with non-European cultures but specialized mainly on written sources (see Kraus, 2007: 142-144; 2014).

**21** The difference between researchers and traders was the preparedness of the former to pursue their research interests, the scientific preparation and the evaluation and publication of the collected data and material, even though only the accompanying costs were covered. Financially independent researchers often donated their collections to museums.

his plans. He died of malaria on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 1924, at the beginning of his fourth research trip – this time as a member of the US American expedition of Alexander Hamilton Rice (1875-1956) to northern Brazil and Venezuela. Shortly before his departure to Brazil, Koch-Grünberg wrote to his friend, the Swedish ethnologist Erland Nordenskiöld (1877-1932), about his plans: "We want to take the route from the Sierra Parima to Casiquiare, if possible, over the still unknown course of the Siapa. Then, if my health allows, I want to spend some time in São Felipe on the upper Rio Negro, to record Arawak myths" (Letter of Koch-Grünberg to Nordenskiöld, 5 May 1924, VK Mr. B.I.4.).

### CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN GERMAN ETHNOLOGY

After this short history of expeditions to the South American lowlands, some aspects of the scholarly work of Max Schmidt can now be considered. Here, I aim at illuminating his work in the context of the developing discipline of ethnology rather than as an entity of its own. The manifold themes and deliberations found in Max Schmidt's work can be taken up in two lines of discussion, which are also present in his book "The Arawak," published in 1917. They clearly indicate the position of his work within the wider ethnological discussion at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. By following these lines, it is first necessary to introduce the most important debates and protagonists of that time.

Questions on the provenance and genesis of peoples and cultures were a principal component of ethnological research during the aforementioned time span. One particular controversy in Germany at the end of the 1900s is associated with the names of Adolf Bastian and Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904). Without refuting processes of diffusion, Bastian propounded his concept of "universal ideas" (*Elementargedanken*, elementary ideas), which developed within a "geographical province" of each cultural unit into "folk ideas" (*Völkergedanken*). He advocated the idea of a regionally independent development of cultural traits, at least as long as no external influences were evident. Ratzel presented the opposite argument. For him independent inventions of cultural phenomena were an exception, which first had to be

**Figure 3**

Bakairí at the Paranatinga river, 1927.  
(Courtesy: Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Germany, No. VIII E 4850)



proven. Ratzel held that cultural similarities could not be explained as multiple and independent formations and, thus, as a parallel course in evolution; instead, they should be seen far more as a singular formation and as the result of subsequent migration, dissemination, and adoption (Koepping, 1983: 60-68; Petermann, 2004: 525-547).<sup>22</sup>

At the start of the twentieth century Bernhard Ankermann (1859-1943) and Fritz Graebner (1877-1934) attracted attention with two articles in which they attempted to identify "cultural circles" (*Kulturkreise*) and "cultural layers" (*Kulturschichten*) in Africa and Oceania (Ankermann, 1905; Graebner, 1905). A few years later, Graebner and Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954), founder of the Vienna school of "cultural circles" (*Wiener Schule der Kulturkreislehre*), applied this approach in a rather schematic way to South America (Graebner, 1909: 1013-1024; W. Schmidt, 1913).<sup>23</sup> Thereby, they closely followed the work of Ratzel as well as that of Leo Frobenius (1873-1938), among others.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from ethnographic literature, the material culture present in museum collections formed the principal basis of data. By analyzing the geographical dissemination of individual elements of culture, or of entire cultural complexes, attempts were made to deduce historical connections in the form of wanderings and adaptations. The differentiation of individual layers of these complexes was intended to enable the construction of at least a relative chronology for the culture historical development, even for those regions where no written sources existed. According to Graebner's work of 1911, *Methode der Ethnologie* (Method in Ethnology), two principal criteria were available as evidence of culture historical connections: "the criterion of form, that is, the correspondence of characteristics, which without necessity comes from the essence of the object, and the criterion of quantitative correspondence" (Graebner, 1911: 108; see also Ankermann, 1911: 159ff.).

Whereas Bastian, who played a seminal part in establishing ethnology as an independent academic discipline in Germany (Fischer; Bolz; Kamel, 2007), had designed this discipline as a strictly inductive, empirically directed science, oriented toward the natural sciences, the persons mentioned above tried to situate ethnology as part of the historical sciences (Foy, 1911; Graebner, 1911; Graebner, 1923; see also Ankermann, 1911, 1926; Bossert; Villar, 2013: 8-13).<sup>25</sup>

Although a number of the issues called for by "culture historians" - as, for example, a critique of the speculated sequence in the stages of evolution; an attempt to increase the use of museum holdings for research purposes by developing a methodology that takes a critical view on sources; and a demand for historical depth in research on cultures that are "non-literate" yet not "without a history"; - could well have agreed with the existing approaches, a fundamental conflict in this line of thinking soon evolved.

As it is not uncommon in scientific debates, the protagonists made ever fewer

**22** A third approach, which besides explaining cultural similarities as many independent formations on the one hand, and adaptations on the other, was the concept of convergence, borrowed from biology. As stated by Paul Ehrenreich (1910: 263), this was understood to mean that "under the influence of the same environment and the same cultural conditions, items of different origins can take on similar forms."

**23** Even though Father Wilhelm Schmidt, who regularly referred to Graebner's writings, repeatedly tried to minimize the contradictions in their respective approaches, the relationship between Graebner and Wilhelm Schmidt was not without tensions (see, for example, W. Schmidt, 1911).

**24** In his *Methode der Ethnologie*, Graebner, educated as a historian, frequently refers to the *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Handbook of the Historical Method and of the Philosophy of History) by Ernst Bernheim (1889, fifth edition 1908). Interestingly, at the conference of 1904 in which Ankermann and Graebner introduced their ideas to the public, Leo Frobenius withdrew from his earlier position, to which both Ankermann and Graebner made reference.

**25** For a comparison between corresponding concepts of exhibitions by Bastian on the one hand and Graebner/Foy on the other, as well as the turn from emphasizing a "psychic unity of mankind" (Bastian) in emphasizing the differences between peoples, see Penny (2003).

efforts to learn from one another and to find common ground. Instead, they strove towards establishing their own positions with the use of sometimes rather coarse and, above all, one-sided promulgations of their respective views at the cost of others. The participants' attempt to expand their claim of superiority and to defy criticism with theoretical arguments shaped the discussions. This narrowed the view of the actual object of study and caused the methods employed to become more and more static, construed, and empirically questionable.<sup>26</sup>

While the portrayal of theories about "diffusionism" and "cultural circles" was the main concern in historical overviews of ethnology among German speakers during the first quarter of the twentieth century,<sup>27</sup> it should not be overlooked that these approaches were already a topic of intense debate among contemporaries. Accordingly, almost all of the aforementioned ethnologists, who had specialized in research on South America, held a critical position towards the theses of Graebner, Foy, Ankermann, and Wilhelm Schmidt.<sup>28</sup> In analogy to Bastian's position in the controversy with Ratzel, the German Americanists rejected the version of diffusionism afore mentioned, yet not the investigation of processes of diffusion as such. During their own research trips, they had observed and described the migration and adoption of various cultural elements. The theories of culture historians, based on unreliable data and premature classifications while increasingly becoming generous in drawing connections between continents, did not comply with the results of the Americanists' detailed regional studies.

After a lecture presented by Ankermann in 1911, in which he once again explained the "theory of cultural circles," and also expressed his agreement with Graebner's "Method" (Ankermann, 1911), both Paul Ehrenreich (1855-1914) and Fritz Krause spoke out critically. Referring to earlier works by Graebner and Foy, and using individual examples from America, Krause contested the accuracy of the purported proof of the dissemination of specific elements of culture. Namely, in the view of regional specialists this evidence was not compatible with the ethnographic data at hand; instead, the various clues had been selected to suit the consistency of theory and methods. Had the investigation begun in America and not in Oceania, whence it was attempted to transfer the achieved results, then – according to Krause – the results would have been completely different (Krause, 1911b, in the appendix to Ankermann, 1911). Two years later, during a discussion about Wilhelm Schmidt's attempt to apply the culture historical method to South America, Krause once again criticized the fact that from the entire ensemble of ethnographic contexts only those elements that seemed to comply with the proposed view had been selected, while other examples were left out of consideration. Furthermore, he emphasized that he himself had studied under Friedrich Ratzel; there he had realized the limitations of the possibilities of geographical cognitions and for this reason he could *not* agree with the culture his-

**26** This applies above all to Foy, later works by Father Wilhelm Schmidt, and to Graebner, albeit somewhat more moderately. Ankermann's formulations are clearly more deliberated; he defended the culture historical direction without rigorously doubting other approaches in ethnology or declaring them out of date. The extent to which polemics and distorted versions had already determined the controversy between Ratzel and Bastian is described by Koepping (1983: 60-68).

**27** Works of the cultural circles' theorists aroused international attention as well. Thus, in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski (1922: 516) distanced himself from previous theories, although he named Ratzel, Foy, Graebner, and F. Wilhelm Schmidt, among others, as the "ethnological school"; other approaches in the German-speaking world were not mentioned. Lowie (1937) discussed the "German diffusionists" during the period in question, but ignored their German-speaking opponents.

**28** On the rejection of the theory of "cultural circles" by German researchers on South America, see the detailed account in Kraus (2004a: 469-481). For criticism in general, among others by Franz Boas and later Robert Lowie in the USA, see – despite the imprecise facts about Paul Ehrenreich and Max Schmidt – Petermann (2004). Likewise, the directors of the Berlin Museum, Felix von Luschan (1854-1924), and the Hamburg Museum, Georg Thilenius (1868-1937), were at least skeptical about the new method (Laukötter, 2007: 67-85).

torical "Method in Ethnology." In his comment he went on to state that, "So many geographical and historical conditions, dispositions, level[s] of culture, economic form[s], among others, of the people in question, play such an important role in shifts and adoptions of culture, that no generally applicable guidelines can be found. Hence, one is forced to decide case to case. But this again opens the door to the run-around with hypotheses, although the method claims to present absolutely objective results that are free of hypotheses. For this reason, I wish to warn against an over-estimation of geographical diffusion with reference to its use in historical investigations; for I am convinced that it is impossible to distinguish the historical layers in geographical distribution, according to generally valid guidelines" (Krause, 1913: 1126).<sup>29</sup>

Paul Ehrenreich, who likewise raised his voice in 1913, emphasized among other points, that although the material culture of South American Indians was relatively well studied, the sociological conditions had been investigated far too little, and that, therefore, the application of concepts developed elsewhere served more for the spread of catch-phrases than for the elucidation of local developments. Some years later, Konrad Theodor Preuss laconically noted in the controversy with Father Wilhelm Schmidt that the latter's theories "stated far more than the Americanists knew." He also concluded that "it appears that when a few elements of a cultural circle are found somewhere, one can reckon with all that otherwise belongs to them; yet this is not at all permissible. Indeed, [the concept of] cultural circles demands most of Americanists, for – in spite of all admissions – things in America often will not correspond" (Preuss, 1927: 146-47). Americanists further criticized that with the aforementioned approaches, methods and theories developed at home (that is, in the museum) would gain greater weight than their own field studies (see Kraus, 2004a: 479ff.).<sup>30</sup>

Max Schmidt was one of the vehement opponents of diffusionism and the theory of cultural circles. Yet, unlike his colleagues, he was not only critical,<sup>31</sup> but with his work "The Arawak" he undertook an attempt to formulate his own model of "the problem of cultural dissemination" in South America. As he had no comprehensive data at his disposal, he could at least fall back on his own experiences and observations in South America (see Fig. 4). In several places in "The Arawak," he substantiated his rejection of the approach of Graebner and Wilhelm Schmidt in detail (Max Schmidt, 1917: 2-3; 23; 92-96; 104). In other writings, he referred again and again to what he saw as the one-sided erroneous view of German-speaking advocates of the cultural circles theory.<sup>32</sup>

As far as his theoretical direction is concerned, Max Schmidt stood quite close to Adolf Bastian; however, he constantly strove towards corrections and augmentations. In an early article about the "Ableitung südamerikanischer Geflechtmuster aus der Technik des Flechtens" (Derivation of South American

**29** The discussion including the critical comments of Krause and Ehrenreich is printed at the end of Wilhelm Schmidt (1913).

**30** Like Malinowski, Graebner was unable to leave Australia due to the beginning of World War I in 1914; however, he did not use the five years of his compulsory stay for comparable field studies. Ankermann journeyed through the Cameroon Grasslands already in 1907-09. Father Wilhelm Schmidt traveled to the USA in 1935, then to China and Japan, but did not conduct fieldwork. Nevertheless, through the assignment of missionaries working as ethnologists Wilhelm Schmidt stimulated a comprehensive research program.

**31** Fritz Krause in Leipzig worked on an alternative program. Although in the course of time, his attitude towards the idea of the approach became more positive, he remained critical. In the early 1920s Krause published short articles in which he outlined an approach that in principle was structural-functionalist in outlook (Kraus, 2004a: 478-79.). After 1933 Krause's image was tarnished by his compliance with national socialist powers.

**32** See, for example, Max Schmidt (1918: 13-15, 24-28, 37; 1919: 349, 352, 357; 1922: 441; 1920-21, vol. 1: 9-10; 1923: 20).



weaving patterns from the technique of weaving), he already concluded that many patterns were simply determined by the material utilized and that a large number of widespread ornaments derived from the technique of weaving. Therefore, a decisive factor for the emergence of decorations was the material and the intended function of the object. For this reason, he advocated – pro Bastian and contra Ratzel – a manifold, independent emergence of specific weaving patterns everywhere, “where palm trees grow and where people use its leaves to weave their domestic utensils” (Schmidt, 1904: 512; see also 1905: 330-397). For solving queries in ethnology, he advocated an inductive approach applied as consistently as possible. Accordingly, he wrote in 1919, “In ethnology as a discipline of the natural sciences only ethnological data determined through sensory perception must form the basis for ethnological conclusions; and as an independent science with its own methods, this science can therefore acknowledge as fully valid only those research results that fulfill this necessary requirement of all ethnological studies” (Schmidt, 1919: 369). Furthermore, he criticized that ethnological examples often had to be shown as illustrations for principles that had long since been gained through deductive thought (Schmidt, 1919: 371).

Not concerned with preferring one theoretical variant over the other, Max Schmidt favored the objective verification of individual cases. Thus, he accepted the deductive approach as a necessary supplement to the inductive approach. Of importance to him was the concept of ethnology as a “science of experience,” the sensory perception is decisive in the process of recognition (Schmidt, 1920-21: vol. 1: 19-20; 1924: 30). The extent to which this should become established practice is shown by his remark that in order to understand weaving patterns, it is important “to have plaited something oneself and to be acquainted with the manner in which a plaited pattern appears during plaiting” (Schmidt, 1905: 374).

In Schmidt's view, the question Graebner had formulated as the basic problem in ethnology after Ratzel – “whether a culture historical association or an independent appearance can be assumed by formal correspondences between objects from different peoples” – could not be solved in this general form as it was “stated falsely”: “In individual cases the question concerned can only reach the extent to which the formal correspondence between objects can be traced back to one of them and how far to the other of both of these often juxtaposed effective powers. Especially the form of objects from spatially separated tribes can only be explained in that way, that all of those factors are drawn forth equally, through which the form of the individual objects can be determined. But a whole series of such determining formal factors have to be considered, of which one exerts its force more in the direction of borrowing or transferring, the other more in the direction of an independent emergence and development” (Schmidt, 1918: 13-14).<sup>33</sup>

Schmidt rejected evolutionism as much as the cultural circles theory

**33** Here Schmidt referred to Graebner (1911: 94); see also Schmidt (1920-21, vol. 1: 17).

(Schmidt, 1924: 40-44; also, 1920-21, vol. 1: 8-20). However, his corresponding statements were not without contradictions. For example, the idea that non-literate cultures could give insights into European prehistory was anchored so firmly in Western thinking that it appears repeatedly, even in the work of opponents of evolutionism (Schmidt, 1923: 3; 108-09).<sup>34</sup>

#### GERMAN TRENDS IN RESEARCH ON THE SOUTH AMERICAN LOWLANDS

Despite a general consensus among German Americanists to dissociate themselves from diffusionism and the theory of cultural circles, differing views did arise within the framework of individual regional research. Therefore, Max Schmidt's position should be analyzed from this aspect as well.

German ethnologists who traveled to Amazonia at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century were concerned with a myriad of different themes. Although not all of them pursued the same research interests, certain focal points can be recognized.

On the one hand, they shared a concern with material culture – as mentioned for both scholarly and financial reasons. They also shared the aim to circumscribe the life of the people encountered during their travels as comprehensively and multifaceted as possible. Moreover, in addition to "material culture" a concern with the so-called "intellectual culture" (*geistige Kultur*) predominates, with the documentation of the language, psychological development, mythology, and art.<sup>35</sup> Although data on economic strategies was compiled, it was nevertheless largely descriptive. Sociological issues were scarcely dealt with, as Robert Lowie and Herbert Baldus had already noted (Baldus, 1970 [1954]: 30-33; 214; 347; 351; 774; Lowie; 1937: 6; Lowie on Nimuendajú, 8 August 1938, cited in Dungs, 1991: 291).

In the latter respect, the work of Max Schmidt was an exception as he repeatedly called for a more detailed involvement with sociological and economical questions (Fig. 5).<sup>36</sup> As early as his first research trip to the Xingu river in 1901, Schmidt was concerned with collecting genealogical data in order to connect this information with questions about the economy and the legal situation. His interests extended to the daily life he observed, as well as to the underlying structures. Therefore, Schmidt – probably through his juridical schooling – not only called for the use of uniform terms, but also pointed out the necessity of explaining which of the indigenous concepts actually corresponded with the terms employed. For example, in an early article about the "Guaná" (= Chané, see Susnik [1991: 16]) he remarked:

"It has already been mentioned that in view of the linguistic material at hand the subdivisions of the Guaná tribe listed in the following table [...] are, from a

**34** Interestingly, similar statements can be found in Ankermann 1911: 156. Conversely, Schmidt's application of categories employed in European prehistory, such as "Stone Age" (1923: 108ff.; 1924: 291) had already been criticized by von den Steinen (1894: 203, 212). Like Koch-Grünberg, von den Steinen was strongly influenced by evolutionist ideas, although the personal experiences of both during fieldwork had a relativizing effect, see Kraus (2004a: 397ff.; 421-432).

**35** See in greater detail Kraus (2004a: 399-418). Here the most important protagonists are Karl von den Steinen, Paul Ehrenreich, Theodor Koch-Grünberg, and Konrad Theodor Preuss.

**36** Another exception was Fritz Krause, who in 1924 presented a short study on economic ethnology and worked on the study of "structural-functional theory" (see also footnote 31). The most significant socio-ethnological research was undertaken by Curt Unckel Nimuendajú (1883-1945), who emigrated to Brazil in 1903, and thus despite continuous contact, was no longer firmly institutionally based in Germany.

linguistic standpoint, at most dialectically different. The basis upon which this differentiation of different groups within the population with specific names rests, whether linguistic, economic, juridical or local, cannot be stated with certainty due to the uncertainty in sociological aspects that unfortunately exists in the literature [...] as well as in a large number of travel reports. Camaño speaks of 4 '*tribus*' of the '*nacion Guana*'. According to Hervas the Guaná are divided into 7 '*poblaciones ó tribus*', according to Azara in '*seis parcialidades, que se gobiernan sin dependencia unas de otros*', by Aguirre in '*5 naciones*', by Castelnau in '*tribus principales*' and finally by Taunay in '*ramificações*'. This mayhem of designations for one and the same social form shows quite clearly how much ethnology suffers from a lack of uniform terms, especially in the fields of sociology and law" (Schmidt, 1903: 326).<sup>37</sup>

Regarding his work on "The Arawak," the location of the publication is already indicative of Schmidt's sociological interests. His book was published in the series issued by Alfred Vierkandt (1867-1953), *Studien zur Ethnologie und Soziologie* (Studies in Ethnology and Sociology).<sup>38</sup> In his introductory text Vierkandt emphasized that the books in the series should deal foremost with the border area between ethnology and social theory, "in that they examine ethnological themes from a sociological point of view." A strict delimitation on one or the other subject was not intended, as psychological questions should also be considered. By contrast, "the old method of boundless comparisons" was excluded; "instead, only the facts within relatively uniform cultural areas, especially within the so-called ethnographic provinces, should be compared with one another." The themes foreseen in the series – Vierkandt included "family and education; law and customs; self-help and war; political organization and classes; clans and men's societies; community and exchange in nutrition; landowning and ban on land;" and also "the emergence and principles of the class state as well as the mechanisms and social achievements of morality" – should be examined in an "inductive way" in the planned publications (Vierkandt, 1917).

With his sociological, juridical, and economic interests, Max Schmidt introduced new lines of inquiries in the discussions in German research on South America. In addition, he strove towards interdisciplinary connections for the young discipline. Moreover, he took a critical stand towards existing trends in Americanistics research. As early as 1907, Schmidt criticized the "stepmotherly" treatment of economic conditions as compared to "ornament and mythology" (Schmidt, 1907: 461).<sup>39</sup> His attempts to bring approaches of different disciplines together are among others attested in his *Grundriß der ethnologischen Volkswirtschaftslehre* (Outline of Ethnological Economic Theory) (1920-21).

Although clearly distanced from the dominating variant of the theory of cultural circles, German Americanists also attempted to reconstruct the affinity between Indian ethnic groups as well as the origins and historical wanderings of

**37** Max Schmidt also criticized the manifold lists of words pointing to the two "separate worlds of terms" of Europeans and Indians. Terms such as "family," "house" or "tribe," that Europeans take for granted were – according to Schmidt – often insufficiently defined. The actual contextual meaning of a simple designation, as translated by indigenous persons was, therefore, dubious: "In order to come closer to [the meaning of] the term 'house', the question arises first about the extent to which this term actually exists among the Indians, [that is] the extent to which there is a term in their vocabulary that corresponds to our word 'house'. Unfortunately, most vocabularies that we have collected from native peoples and especially those that focus on material goods, are still insufficient in that they present for the most part a more or less arbitrary translation of our European terms, upon which they are focused far too much. Thus, just any word for 'house' is often given in vocabularies without more precise information concerning the specific kind of house that is meant in the respective case" (Schmidt, 1922: 444). As important as this recognition was, it did not save Schmidt from making mistakes in his own translations (see Münzel, 2004: 443).

**38** Vierkandt, who had inter alia studied under Friedrich Ratzel and Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, achieved his *habilitation* in 1896 with a study of *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker* (Natural Peoples and Cultural Peoples). He was one of the founders of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Society of Sociology) in 1909 (Petermann, 2004: 775-76; Strenge 1991).

**39** A later remark, that

these groups. The different fields and subjects that Americanists tried to combine were at first foremost geography (regional division, environmental influences), anthropology (body form, appearance; in the German custom of speech at the time, "anthropology" as a rule meant "physical anthropology") as well as linguistics and ethnology (that is, the study of material and intellectual culture; sometimes aspects of linguistics were also assigned to ethnology).

However, researchers on Amazonia soon turned away from investigations in the field of (physical) anthropology.<sup>40</sup> For them the decisive criterion was language, or membership of a language family. Thus, Karl von den Steinen, who at that time proposed a theory about the "primeval homeland" of the Caribs (that was later rejected), already underlined the methodologically leading role of linguistics (Steinen, 1886: 325; see Kraus, 2004a: 403-08; 2007).<sup>41</sup> In an article published in 1891, Paul Ehrenreich maintained: "The ethnographic division of an ancient population like the Brazilians, who have not come to a differentiation according to nationality, nor to a formation of state, can only be achieved on a linguistic basis, for the sole reason that the individual peoples are distinguishable only through their language" (Ehrenreich, 1891: 85).<sup>42</sup>

As his use of the term "Arawak" demonstrates, Schmidt agreed with this criterion of a common classification of specific ethnic groups; however, in his view this was only a hypothetical starting point for further investigations. Linguistic relationships alone, according to Schmidt, did not allow any secure deductions about the historical origins or genesis of a people (Schmidt, 1917: 8-9; 15-16; 19-20; 72). Instead, he emphasized that "individual cases of the repression of Arawak dialects need not be connected with the suppression of Arawak cultures as well. This is far more the case of foreign languages being learned and employed specifically for the purpose of expanding the sphere of power over foreign influences" (Schmidt, 1917: 21).

With his *Überschichtungshypothese* (hypothesis of superimposition, see Münzel, 2004: 438) Schmidt thus tried, among other things, to differentiate the framework of analysis for the (re-)constructed developments in South America, while the dominant German research tradition on the Lowlands at that time, as mentioned above, was oriented towards other factors: regional distribution, language, material culture (as well as increasingly myths), and physique, with a focal point on the determination of the geographical distribution of linguistically related ethnic groups. In this context, Schmidt endeavored to pay more attention to sociological and economical aspects (according to him: specific rules of filiation and marriage as well as other cultural patterns that served to achieve the goals of land occupation, the acquisition of work forces and the protection of the means of production).<sup>43</sup> Yet, in his work about "The Arawak," these factors took on decisive significance for Schmidt in the dissemination and change of cultures – in the case under study, particularly the Arawak, as well

during a stay on a larger expedition the normal way of life was disturbed and that the economic life came to a pause, for which reason most observers scarcely noticed it, was possibly a jab at von den Steinen (Schmidt, 1922: 442).

<sup>40</sup> Educated as physicians, both von den Steinen und Ehrenreich were initially concerned with physical anthropology; however, in the course of time they distanced themselves ever more from this subject. The study of skulls and body measurements in no way was the determining subject of the times (see Kraus, 2004a: 399-418). A development away from physical anthropology to art-ethnology is discernible elsewhere as well, as shown by Christian Kaufmann with the case of the Oceania specialist Felix Speiser (1880-1949). Speiser also undertook a journey to Brazil in 1924.

<sup>41</sup> On the use of these categories in contemporary discussions, see for example von den Steinen 1886: 323-329; Ehrenreich 1891, Ehrenreich 1897; Vierkandt 1897. For an early critique on von den Steinen's theories, see Baer 1965; for a critique on Schmidt, see in addition Münzel 2004: 436ff.; for current views on settlement history in the Xingu region, see Franchetto and Heckenberger (eds.) 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the works of the Americanists mentioned here contradict the widely quoted argument of the US-American historian Andrew Zimmerman (2001: 3; 20; 49-61) that in the early years of ethnological study in Germany indigenous peoples were considered peoples "without culture and history" and that philological and linguistic methods played no decisive role in their study.

as the ethnic groups influenced by them. Against the approaches that focus foremost on language, Schmidt attempted, on the one hand, to consider cultural differences among the different Arawak-speaking ethnic groups and, on the other, to distinguish between the "motifs," the "means" and the "actual nature" of the dissemination.

The fact that Schmidt in his writings, was quick to use interesting initial observations for far-reaching and sometimes questionable conclusions, is shown by another example of how he first detached himself from predominating trends in ethnology in a constructive manner. Theodor Koch-Grünberg rejected any deeper meaning in the Indian rock carvings he discovered on the upper Rio Negro and interpreted them as "playful expressions of a naïve perception of art" (Koch-Grünberg, 1907: 68; 78-79.).<sup>44</sup> By contrast, Max Schmidt pointed out a mythological content in the carvings of the Guató and Paresí and presented observations that had possibly gone unnoticed by Koch-Grünberg elsewhere in Brazil. Yet Schmidt went beyond the informative value of his results by attempting to enhance the symbolic contents of these drawings as the discovery of a "primitive pictographic script" (Schmidt, 1917: 70-71) (see Fig. 6).<sup>45</sup>

**43** Sociological concepts are found in places among advocates of the cultural circles theory; yet these theorists made less use of empirical data like strictly observed marriage rules and more of complex abstract constructs like "two-class culture" or "totemism in connection with paternal rights," whose supra-regional use was already strongly criticized by Ehrenreich among others. See also Lowie (1937: 180-185).

**44** Thereby, this theory initially received great acceptance. See Ehrenreich

**Figure 4**

Max Schmidt with a group of Paresí in Hanauinahirtigo at the Juruena river, 1910. (Courtesy: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, No. VIII E 2744)







## CONCLUSION

The extent to which Max Schmidt's theory on the dissemination of culture can still act as a stimulus for research must be judged by current experts on Arawak culture(s).<sup>46</sup> A detailed historical analysis of his book "The Arawak," with respect to his peculiar thoughts on a "drive towards acquisition and subjugation," on the concept of a class of "masters" and "slaves" or on economic inequality as decisive factors for cultural development—as well as the political consequences of such views—is still lacking but warrants a comprehensive study.<sup>47</sup> Certainly noteworthy is his emphasis on a slow and step-by-step process of cultural change in contrast to theories proposing great waves of migrations as well as the concept of cultural mixing as a condoned if not fostered co-product of economic colonialism.

The aim of this article is to place Max Schmidt's work in the context of contemporary ethnological trends in Germany and thereby, alongside the introductory remarks on then developing field research prior to Malinowski, to place his position through a two-fold contextualization in a historical context, markedly reflected in all his works, but most clearly in his monograph, *Die Aruaken. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Kulturverbreitung*: (1) a critique of diffusionism and cul-

**Figure 5**

Plantation of chief Makazore in Hanauinhirtigo at the Juruena river, 1910. (Courtesy: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, No. VIII E 2747)

(1906) and Vierkandt (1908). For a comparison of contemporary theories on the emergence of art in South America, see Kraus (2000-2001).

**45** Schmidt first formulated his theory in a previous publication (Schmidt, 1914b: 282-83). On the interpretations of paintings on wooden posts and house posts, see the details in Schmidt (1914a: 231-237) and

Koch-Grünberg (1967 [1909-10], vol. 2: 240-245). Furthermore, in his critique of evolutionism

tural circles theory, ever more dominant in the German-speaking world whereby Schmidt, as shown above, was in agreement with other researchers on South America; and (2) the controversy among specialists about the prevailing research focuses on the South American Lowlands. In both respects, Schmidt tried to formulate his own position and move beyond the mainstream. At the same time he consistently strove towards interdisciplinary ties.

This originality - as well as the fact that his great personal engagement in fieldwork was rather unspectacular in comparison to the famed expeditions of his times, due at the very least to the recurrent illnesses during his journeys, - was potentially contributing to the fact that during his lifetime Schmidt was one of the figures on the periphery of German ethnology. The decline of the Americanist research tradition in Germany during both World Wars, as well as Schmidt's emigration, likely fostered this development even more.

Nonetheless, with regard to the time-dependent perception of a scholar - which furthermore must take into consideration his participation in establishing ethnology in Paraguay - no concluding judgment can be made on the originality of his concepts. In sum, as this essay illustrates, the methodical approach, the thematic direction, and the internal discussion of ethnologists at the time, were much more multifaceted than is explicated in many an overview that concentrates on the dominant schools of thought. Andre Gingrich distinguished the group of "historical diffusionists" and the group of "moderate positivists" among ethnologists in the German-speaking world at the beginning of the twentieth century, whereby he assigned Max Schmidt to the latter group. Gingrich concludes: "The moderate positivists did not become as famous, but in retrospect I regard them as the far more interesting group of scholars. In their time, however, they became increasingly marginal as the historical diffusionists gained new hegemony in anthropology in the German language zone" (Gingrich, 2005: 91). For the history of science this reminds us that in historical research, in which one is not only interested in summarizing reviews of dominant contemporary concepts but also in finding stimulating questions, it is well worth the effort to take a fresh look at former investigations beyond the mainstream discussions of a time period.



Schmidt opposed the concept followed by Koch-Grünberg (1905), among others, that in their historical development [adult] Indian drawings could be compared with the drawings of European children (Schmidt, 1920-21, vol. 1: 14; 1924: 40-41.).

**46** For an appreciation of Schmidt's analysis, see Bossert and Villar (2013: 27), who, among other things, conclude that his "hypothesis was ahead of its time because it conceived of the Arawak as a hybrid conglomeration of intermingled, essentially mestizo societies. As such, it departed from the ideal equation according to which: one ethnic group = one territory = one language = one culture (an equation which, be it said in passing, has since been impugned by modern social sciences)." For a critique of Schmidt's theses, see Münzel (2004: 436ff); for a comparative overview of studies on Arawak peoples, see Hill and Santos-Granero (2002).

**47** Here one important line of study is surely the influence of Alfred Vierkandt. Schmidt cites Vierkandt in *Die Aruaken* four times (see his footnotes 60, 96, 163 and 186), whereby he mostly refers to *Die Stetigkeit im Kulturwandel. Eine soziologische Studie* (The Constancy in Cultural Change: A Sociological Study) of 1908. See also footnote 38.

**Figure 6**

Max Schmidt.  
(Courtesy: Archivo fotográfico Museo Etnográfico Dr. Andrés Barbero in Asunción, Paraguay)

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